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Regina A. Root

raroot@wm.edu

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Imagining Conquest: El Tapiz and Postrevolutionary Mexico*

Regina A. Root
raroot@wm.edu

When submitting my abstract over a year and a half ago, I had many questions of the artifact to which I would dedicate a year of intense study, the so called Tillett tapestry. I took a giant leap of hope, planning ahead with radical optimism, knowing that nothing had been published before about this subject and thinking through the material I had. Following the leads in this project became more of a Pandora's box than imagined because its archival recovery process and oral interviews with family members and relatives converged and diverged in unexpected ways. What seemed remarkably obvious became a series of interesting questions to solve because no one had ever confirmed the facts or followed up on all the leads. My idea for the project and this presentation quickly began to shift in flight alongside me. Here is what I knew and these are the facts about this monumental textile.

The Tillett Tapestry is a 106 foot long embroidery that contains fifty five million stitches representing chronologically the conquest of Mexico from both indigenous and Spanish points of view. Like the Bayeux tapestry (circa 1070s) narrating the last successful invasion of England, this tapestry involved collaborations with hundreds of embroiderers. Completed and signed in 1977, the work was assembled and overseen by textile designer Leslie Tillett (who lived from 1915 to 1992), perhaps best known for his unique creations for the Kennedy White House and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis along with his wife D. D. Tillett. The Tilletts had met Jacqueline Kennedy and Robert Kennedy while involved with the textile empowerment project of Bedford Stuyesant, which daughter Linnea Tillett describes as "a larger tapestry of concern for social justice that was at the core" of her father's ethical, aesthetic nature. Family members dispute the name of the artifact in question and remember arguing over what it should be called because the concern was that it would "be rejected by the people he wanted to reach"¹. I have documented various names, including El Tapiz, The Conquered, and The Conquest of Mexico tapestry. When digging through the archives, I found that Leslie Tillett copyrighted this monumental embroidery in 1978 with the Library of Congress.² It was to be known as The Tillett Tapestry. The genesis for this tapestry can be traced to postrevolutionary Mexico, with its cultural renaissance in full bloom when Leslie, his brother James and Father George moved to Mexico in 1940. James came from Tahiti and met his brother Leslie and father George in the United States (San Francisco). Newspaper and magazine articles, from *Women's Wear Daily* to *Harper's Bazaar*, suggest they chose Mexico for its exuberant color and thriving artistic community but McCarthy era documents reveal more urgent considerations. Leslie Tillett describes in typed notes, referring to a conversation he had with Diego Rivera about the Mexican muralist's creative process for what became his frescoes for the Cortés Palace in Cuernavaca, the following epiphany. "In talking with Diego Rivera... I determined on using only authentic early sources and

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¹ Interview with Linnea Tillett. February 10, 2016.

² Leslie Tillett, *The Tillett Tapestry*. Library of Congress Copyright Office, TXu 13-113. 1978.

to invent nothing. Rivera encouraged me and directed me to the codices of the conquest period.”³ Tillett believed it possible to illustrate a day by day chronology of the conquest and poured into Mexican cultural history and its conquest artifacts. The connection to Rivera came through brother James who married Nieves Orozco, the young artistic model who began her career with Rivera at the age of fourteen, posing for artists affiliated with La Escuela de San Carlos. The Tilletts forged important ties to the diverse artistic community of Taxco, some 100 miles southwest of Mexico City, where they set up a thriving textile factory that eventually catered to Hollywood celebrities and a *Harper's Bazaar* reporter, Doris Doctorow, who would stay in Mexico after an interview became the beginning of a lifetime with Leslie Tillett. In an interview, Nieves Orozco told me that they chose a factory site ideal for 82 foot tables, a darkroom, a color mixing room, a washroom, and color fixing room⁴. Because of World War II related shortages, supplies were scarce and the Tillett brothers improvised: popular cotton organdy instead of silk, rubber instead of wood frames, clips to keep material in place. The factory opened with mostly Spanish Civil War refugees, who George Tillett wanted to employ, but they rebelled so often (“eran muy conflictivos”, she told me, or “they were very controversial”) that ultimately the factory hired Mexican artisans exclusively. Her recollections of 50,000 Spanish Civil War refugees who were granted asylum by Lázaro Cárdenas in 1939 predominate. When asked what drove the Tillett's fascination for Mexico, she said it was the city of eternal spring that is Cuernavaca, where the family set up a boutique, as well as the friendliness and hospitality of the Mexican people they met, the ability to hire workers inexpensively. The artistic brochures, train manuals and Spanish phrase books for Mexican travelers by Frances Toor underscore that tourism in Mexico was more visible, a country perceived in the United States as so far and yet so close to home.

From a design perspective, the postrevolutionary moment presented new freedoms of expression. As silversmith William Spratling noted, himself a resident of Taxco, there was “a conviction that certain materials have the right to be worked in a given community because they are native to that area and that the work of the designer is to utilize these materials and to dignify them.”⁵ For textile design, this was an intriguing moment: on one hand, the Tilletts fostered appreciation for these new Mexican aesthetics; on the other, they sought to push the medium itself to new limits, aware of the crosscurrents coming through Taxco: Spanish Civil War refugees, who the Tilletts initially hired as employees for their textile factory, artisans, painters, tourists. The Tilletts of Taxco became known for their use of manta cloth, innovative color and designs, collaborations and spontaneity. Thinking through the history of the conquest, Leslie Tillett writes in typed notes, “The relics of that brutal war are all around one and assert themselves still in daily life.” He collected postcards and poured through the narratives of Spanish conquistadors and the Florentine Codex, the Moctezuma Codex, and the “Lienzo de Tlaxcala” (literally the “Cloth of Tlaxcala”). In the decades that followed, he consulted archives throughout the world to bring together visual imagery in some possible chronological order, choosing the colors and sometimes stitches. One must admire the sheer scope of this tapestry, assembled long before the existence of the Internet, which only today allows for an easy retrieval, cut and paste of these historical images. Instead, the historical meaning of each was considered carefully. Eventually, writes

³ Leslie Tillett, Typed notes. Undated. Courtesy of the Tillett family.

⁴ Interviews with Nieves Orozco. February 26 and 28, 2016.

⁵ William Spratling, *File on Spratling. An Autobiography* [1932] (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 73.

Tillett, the tapestry represented some 231 scenes, 1,493 human figures, and 3,544 letters of bilingual text (in English and Spanish).⁶

Narrating the encounter between New World and Old, the tapestry begins with Cortés's departure from Cuba and concludes with the surrender of the Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec Emperor. It integrates scenes like the building of Vera Cruz, Malintzin's translations, the battles of Tlaxcala and Cholula, the so called "Night of Sadness" when the Spanish retreated from Tenochtitlán (today's Mexico City) and many drowned in Lake Texcoco as the vessel and treasures carried sank. As if to remember the cloth upon which indigenous painters once gave accounts of the Spanish conquest, the Tillett Tapestry unites the stories of the conquerors and the conquered, one stitch at a time. Leslie Tillett researched and rendered his versions of European and indigenous visual iconography until 1955, when he began to finance this project according to the best of his abilities. "A project like the tapestry can be worked on indefinitely," he wrote, "but I decided to call it done in 1976."

When I presented my proposal for this conference, I hoped to find out more about the embroiderers who worked to stitch this story. Tillett made outlines in India ink and sometimes provided notes on historic colors. He hired artisan Luis Rodríguez of Telas Rancho to hand spin and hand weave the continuous cotton *manta* upon which the tapestry was ultimately embroidered. He employed artisans in Yelapa, Puerto Vallarta, Cuernavaca and Chiapas. These artisans also hand spun and hand dyed colors for the embroidery yarns. Having begun his career as a color chemist in his family's design business, Tillett likely paid attention to the meaning and properties of all selections. Although I have located a few photographs of the artisans as well as a rare document with the name and first person narrative of one embroiderer involved in the project, I have been unable to find or interview any of these subjects; one can only wonder what these representations of conquest might have meant to the largely indigenous women who stitched them. Tillett writes that he hired groups of several hundred women working in groups of six to thirty at a time (another account lists three hundred women in collaboration over a seventeen year period). Dek Tillett, Leslie Tillett's oldest son, recently shared that some of the tapestry was finished in Haiti in 1968; he personally oversaw the process in Port au Prince where embroiderers who put together major league baseballs for the IMEX corporation embraced the opportunity to work on a creative project that the tapestry represented, stitching figures and thinking through artistic gestures so that its subjects could come alive.⁷ Embroidered bands with literal descriptions in Spanish and English were added in Queens, New York, to finalize the tapestry in 1976. At that time, Leslie Tillett reflected on the emergence and growth of the Hispanic population in the United States, recognizing that "the conquest is a direct part of their history" and citing this as a reason for making the tapestry's text bilingual. While the historical record falls silent on the voices of those who collaborated and stitched each unit of design, I am certain that this embroidery represents the legacies of the artisans, the conquest imagined, and Leslie Tillett himself.

The tapestry can be considered an original American design, inspired by cross cultural perspectives and perhaps without comparison in American folk art. Previewed at the Fashion

⁶ Leslie Tillett and The Mexican Cultural Institute. Exhibition invitation to the opening of "The Conquest of Mexico" The Tillett Tapestry. San Antonio, Texas. May 12, 1983.

⁷ Interview with Dek Tillett. July 8, 2016.

Institute of Technology, the tapestry was exhibited at venues like the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe and the Cortés Palace in Cuernavaca. During the 1980s, Leslie Tillett worked very hard to find the tapestry a permanent home but its size and fragile nature seemed to limit the possibilities. He proposed new ways to exhibit the tapestry, including one that included an ambitious proposal for Manhattan's first Mexican Cultural Center. There were plans to sell the tapestry to the city of San Antonio, with the embroidery stashed in a bank vault there for months and months as then Mayor Henry Cisneros, then presiding over that city's Mexican cultural society, debated how to fund and exhibit such a monumental work. Leslie Tillett believed the tapestry could be expanded by another 100 feet and correspondence I have pieced together shows that he already had a very good plan in place for expanding the chronology of the conquest to include a botanical history. The Mexican government expressed great interest in purchasing the tapestry but this fell through at the moment of sale. The tapestry returned to the family and is slated for exhibition at the Museo de Arte Popular in Mexico City in time for the 500th year commemoration of the 1519 conquest of Mexico. As a multilingual and moveable work of art, the Tillett Tapestry will offer an opportunity to wrestle with what it means to be conquered or the conqueror and to understand the terms of cultural heritage and historic memory.

Conclusion

"For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," writes Audre Lorde.⁸

Textiles are powerful cultural tools that convey multivalent meanings. They rearticulate the past, inspire creative expression, enact change, and produce meaning through the agency of the people involved in their creation and display. In the realm of design and popular culture, the souls of people who made or once wore these textiles often remain forgotten, as these are the human counterparts to the discarded realities along the supply chain. Read against the grain and through the traps of tolerance, textiles cross borders and sometimes travel the world during their creation, production, consumption, exhibition, and refashioning. They each represent rich and meaningful stories. How, then, to frame the human spirit and make visible the emotional costs of a larger narrative of colonization and globalization? How to capture the cross currents (the topic of this conference) as we interpret the terms of cultural appropriation for modern aesthetics?

Traditional textiles have often been circumscribed by geography, a localized examination of craft and design. These days the flows of international tourism and globalization have made it important for textiles to be relevant to the communities they represent and serve. One could easily argue that affiliations to cultural identity in design get devalued when models of production manipulate art forms. As Audre Lorde argues in another context, "advocating the mere tolerance of difference" denies "the creative function of difference"⁹. While textiles serve as creative artifacts through which to engage meaningful cultural exchange, they also depend on the "master's tools", such as exoticizing the Other without enacting any meaningful social change. Projections of traditional motifs might allow one to ponder tolerance with some thoughtfulness, but such actions do not advocate for the inclusion and acceptance of all cultures *and* their politicoeconomic logics. How, then, can we work to minimize the damage and make apparent the vulnerability of those minimized? What to do, more precisely, when modern

⁸ Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, California: The Crossing Press, 1984), 110-113. Find these same words on p. 112.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

aesthetics appear to rely on a textile design process that maintains these silences?

I don't necessarily have any answers for these questions. But they seemed like good questions to offer to our discussion on the "Appropriation of Modern Aesthetics".